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ABSTRACT

Strong girls and bright colors characterize many Swedish picture books in recent years. The girls are visible and active, and the books also include many wise mothers. The picture books deal with a variety of subjects, ranging from very difficult subjects like death to pure nonsense. Sweden has many good illustrators who work experimentally with colors and shapes. Some are influenced by cartoons and they use their expressions widely, humorously, artistically, and innovatively. One of the themes in Swedish picture books that is emphasized in this paper is deep life experiences and feelings, including essential emotions like jealousy or the fear of not being good enough. The paper provides annotations of Swedish picture books in the following thematic areas: (1) strong girls--the gender perspective; (2) love, friendship, and family life; (3) picture book wisdom; (4) separated worlds--the child and the grown up; (5) life and death; (6) good books for the very small; (7) experiments in shape and color; and (8) humor. (MES)

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Strong Girls and Bright Colours- current themes in Swedish picture books

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Strong girls and bright colours characterise many Swedish picture books in recent years. The girls are visible and active and there are lots of wise mothers too. The picture book may deal with very difficult subjects, like death, as well as with pure nonsense. Sweden has many good illustrators who work experimentally with colours and shapes. Some are influenced by cartoons and they use their expressions widely, humorously, artistically and are highly innovative.

One of the themes in Swedish picture books that I want to emphasise is the deep experiences and feelings that we all meet in life, no matter who or where we are - essential emotions like jealousy, bad conscience or the fear of not being good enough. This theme is difficult to mirror, but many authors/illustrators have succeeded quite well within the wide concept of the picture book. Some put the stress on the words and some on the pictures, but the strong expression is made by words and pictures together forming an ikonotext.

Strong Girls – the gender perspective
I am glad to say that there are plenty of strong, brave, even striking, girls in the picture books of recent years; girls who take the initiative, who don't back off even if they are afraid.
We can talk about a gender perspective in the picture book and the need to high-light girls as main characters. There is definitely a gender discussion going on in Swedish picture books today.

"Nice girls go to heaven, others will go as far as ever" is an expression that is often illustrated by a woman who looks at herself in a mirror. In ***"My bold mouth"*** with words by *Kim Futz* and pictures by *Eva Eriksson*, the opening scene is a girl who looks at her bold mouth in a mirror, looks and remembers what happened earlier the same day.

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The approach is retro-perspective, unusual for picture books. The story is about the mouth that doesn't do what the owner wants. It says nasty things to people the whole day, but in the end, the girl gets two lovely rewards: a candy and a kiss. To be impudent may be a good thing, sometimes…
Eva Eriksson is one of the most skilful Swedish illustrators who also create picture books of her own, writing the words as well.

Gittan and the Grey Wolves by *Pija Lindenbaum* won the August Prize 2000 – a Swedish award for the best children's book of the year. The book is very wise and humorous.
The fantastic illustrations cover the pages generously. The pictures play with shapes, perspectives and movements.

Gittan is a girl who doesn't do what girls are not supposed to. She dares almost nothing at all. But one day, left alone by her pre-school group, she meets the grey wolves. She immediately takes the lead and commands the wolves to play with her. Red is the dominating colour in the pictures. Red is also the colour of Gittan´s jacket.

The story is about fear and courage. How to overcome one's fear, and that everything is not shown on the surface of people. The story has background from reality. Pija´s own daughter was just such a girl who didn't dare to climb. In the book as well as in reality, the final picture illustrates the girl standing on the rooftop of the playhouse… *Pija Lindenbaum* illustrates and writes as well.

The girl who just wanted to read (ill.: *Anna Clara Tidholm*, words by *Sonja Hulth*)
This book is about a girl who lives on top of a hill in a house without electricity. She carries home lots of books from the library, but at home there is no light. So she buys a windmill from a post order company, but then the winds themselves disappear. There's only one thing to do: go out and hunt for winds. And the winds promise to blow as long as there are unread books in the world…
This girl is positive to identify with. She is active, practical and she does just what she wants to do – she reads.

Ann-Clara Tidholm is one of my favourites. She is a skilful illustrator, often illustrating together with her husband Thomas who does the lyrics. Their picture books have important messages and shows great respect for children, especially the very small ones.

Eva Lindström likes to write about strong independent girls who do what they want. In
Me and Stig dig a hole the girl is the one who does things, rolls downhill and digs.
Stig doesn´t dare. Instead he reads cartoons. When Stig falls into the hole, the girl lifts him up again, and when they quarrel, she is the one who compromises. The book deals skilfully with conflicts and shows how to become friends although you are different – active/passive, brave/a coward.
The books about ***Me and Stig*** are small passion dramas. In ***I Like Stig,*** Eva Lindström manages to describe such a complex feeling as jealousy in small words and expressive illustrations. Lindström's pictures create a world of its own. Her figures are huge with rounded or square somewhat sullen faces. They form vulnerability and expositivity, but also warmth and happiness. She uses a perspective from down under and things are spread over the surface on top of each other in a very deliberate composition with no depth. Details turn up over and over again, leaves, snails, and worms, a rope that winds over to the next page, a cat in the background… Dark soily colours and naivism. Lindström knows a lot about the human mind – love pain can be eased by chocolate…

Good picture books have something for every reader; for the four years old child as well as the forty years old adult. We all carry a need to be understood and comforted. Eva Lindström gives an on-the-spot account from every day's life anywhere, anyhow.

Lene Glow-Worm by *Helena Olofsson* is an essential book about mobbing. Lene is new in the class and is met by a girl who instantly gives her the name Glow-Worm. This is a rather dark story about how nasty little girls sometimes treat each other. The pictures underline the nastiness, how it feels when everybody turn their backs on you and whisper… Shows the anger and pain inside the victim that cannot be expressed.

Love, friendship and family life

Love and friendship is another important theme. Happy love, love between children and adults, between children and animals Where animals often function as metaphors, sustainable relations where persons develop deeper understanding, more existential like in the books about ***Mina*** *and* ***The Hedgehog and the Mole****. Some books describe modern varieties of family life, the divorced parent or the homosexual family.*

Anna Höglund and *Gunnar Lundkvist* have written and drawn the books about ***the Hedgehog and the Mole***. Gender perspectives, where the meticulous and dutiful Mole (the man, drawn by Gunnar Lundkvist) lives with the bohemic immaterial and immediate Hedgehog (the woman, drawn by Anna Höglund). The Hedgehog lives nowhere, so the Mole invites her to his home for pancakes. They are totally different (two different sexes). The books are about the need to be alone and the need to be together with someone at the same time without losing one's integrity, about respect and tolerance. Very humorous, indeed

In ***The Hedgehog and the Mole plays soccer*** the Hedeghog wakes up early, finds a football and starts to play on her own. The Mole, who has just fallen asleep, wakes up and watches the Hedgehog score one goal after another.

- What kind of rules do you use, he screams.
- My own, the Hedgehog answers.

This is about relations on a high level – love or friendship like an old marriage, but in the small format and with simple pictures and words. Under the surface much is left for the reader to reflect upon. It is easy to misunderstand each other in any relationship.
Books like these can be read by adults and children on different levels. Everybody finds something just for her/him.

In the books about ***Mina and Kåge***, *Anna Höglund* reflects the complexity of love.
How do you meet each other's dreams and wishes in every day's life? In ***Mina in China***,
the little bear Mina reads about China. She gets a strong pulling feeling that she can't resist – she has to go to China while Kåge is rather irritated. Anyway, Kåge helps her getting ready for the trip instead of putting up hinders. The sooner she goes, the sooner she will come back home. In the end they are both happy. They know who they are when they are without each other, and they still want to live together.

Picture book wisdom!!!

Cecilia Torudd has described family life in her comics about The Lonely Mother. In ***The Troll Daddy*** she extends the theme and includes the father as well. This is the story about the mother who is living alone with her son, but realises that the son needs his father. They walk all the way to meet the daddy way up in the mountains. The daddy is a loving father, but irresponsible. He drinks rather than takes care of his family. However, any son needs a daddy to look up to, and that is just what the son gets, although he is clever enough to realise that the father has his weaknesses. So the mother and her son walk home again, remembering the father understanding that such a father is better to have in mind and at a distance…

The Fairytale about the Very Greatest. What is greatest in life? Love, of course.. *Gunna Grähs* describes a middle-aged man with a ponytail, blue jeans and a motor-cycle jacket who meets love in a pizzeria.

Lovely brown eyes and kissable red lips placed on a lady with an exotic look. How he falls in love is just wonderful to read about.
Gunna Grähs co-operates with *Thomas Halling*. They have made three very modern books, varieties of the old fairytale about ***The small small old woman*** by *Elsa Beskow*. Between the new books and the old there are 100 years of picture book development.

Separated worlds – the child and the grown up
A basic theme in many picture books is the differences between children and adults. They live in totally separated worlds. Many of the picture books of today describes how it feels to be small and very young. For adults to remember childhood, how they thought and felt. What was important then? Perhaps books like these can help us adults to bridge the gap between the infant and adult worlds.
It is not unusual to use animals as humans in picture books. Animals as metaphors can make it easier to express complex matters? Many of these stories are just fables although they include their messages inside the story, not as a final sense moral

When Daddy showed me the universe by *Ulf Stark* is illustrated by *Eva Eriksson.* The perspective is totally childish as remembered by an adult. Eva Eriksson catches the mood of the fifties perfectly. Her pictures are very sensitive, full of small comments to the reader. Her illustrations expand the words, communicate with the reader. The story is about the father and the son who takes a walk in the evening. The son's eyes are looking in a totally different direction than the father's - children and adults don't see the same things. While the father wants to show his son the huge universe, the son prefers to look at snails, the grass and other more close things. High and low in the same book, marvellous.

.Pigs instead of children is a theme that *Eva Eriksson* and *Barbro Lindgren* have used to describe the child – adult perspective, how it feels to be small and misunderstood.

Eva Eriksson returns to her own childhood and describes in ***Malla goes shopping*** the good old fifties when people in Sweden felt secure. Malla, the pig-girl, goes shopping with head high, but she comes to the shop, she has forgotten what to buy. The problem of being a child in a shop is very sufficiently illustrated. Children are smaller, they are not visible and become very shy when they forget what to buy. It is however allowed to fail, and behind Malla there is a very wise, understanding grandmother.

Bonny's had enough by *Barbro Lindgren* and *Olof Landström* is about another pig. Benny thinks that everything is just awful. His mother is cleaning the house and quarrels all the time. Benny runs away, but where shall he go? Nobody cares about him. Olof Landströms pictures are characteristic and humorous, full of attributes from the 90s. The coldness spread among people (animals), and warmth is nowhere to be found. Benny returns home. At least he has got his mother.

Children's needs are difficult to understand by adults. And needs of animals. Animals and children therefore have a lot in common, and friendship between child and animal is rather common. Typical books in this genre are the books about ***Max*** and ***The wild Baby*** by *Eva Eriksson* and *Barbro Lindgren*

Life and Death
Picture books are able to deal with rather difficult topics like death and other existential matters. The unique concept of words and pictures co-operating to make the expression may be the reason why...

In *Barbro Lindgrens* latest picture book, ***Gunnar the Angel falls Down*** illustrated by *Charlotte Ramel* deals with death and the wish that the beloved ones you have lost one day shall be resurrected. Gunnar, the Angel, has a magic ability – he can wake up the dead, nothing is impossible in the mind of a child...

The black Violin by *Ulf Stark* and *Anna Höglund* tells about Death himself, who is scared away by the music played on a black violin with love for a dying sister. All night until morning her brother plays unlimited melodies. This is really a picture book, a perfect combination of icons and words. Sensitiveness is there; the small but efficient changes in colours and shapes, the sharp contrast between hope and death. Finally Death himself, a figure who loses his definite mission, can´t resist his feelings and lets the sister survive.

Ulf Stark has also written ***Little Asmodeus***. Even this time *Anna Höglund* have created the pictures (interesting team, indeed). In Hell, the Devil has problems with his son, Asmodeus. He is a kind "person" and is forced to prove his evilness to his father. The devil gives him a mission, sends him to the earth to win the Devil a soul. This story corresponds to old stories and fairy tales, is very intertextual. Anna Höglund's pictures make it really suggestive. Fear mixed with humour associates to the Dante Inferno. Do you think Asmodeus will manage to find a willing soul?

Good books for the very small – true pieces of art
Books for the very small are important. I sometimes get the feeling that as long as you use cardboard paper, strong colours and some animals, everything is OK. I often miss the good story, the clear intention to tell a story where words and pictures support each other. Oftentimes it is the illustrations that save the books for the infants. The stories are too thin...

A good book has got to have a story or an obvious context. There has to be a thread to follow on a low level of abstraction. The linking to the next picture or page is essential for understanding. There must be a flow from the cover to the pages – into the book. Browsing itself shall be like in a movie where the links between scenes are the elements that push the story forward. A picture book must be a mixture of words, pictures and browsing, completing each other.

The **Rabbit-books** by *Lena Andersson* are devoted to children. They express a deep knowledge about children's needs and perceptive abilities. The whole books stick together and there are always interesting conclusions.

The **Max-books** by *Barbro Lindgren* and *Eva Eriksson* are other examples of the same thing. The first appeared about 30 years ago, and they are constantly reprinted in new editions.

More innovative and extremely modern are *Anna Clara Tidholm's* ***Monkey Fine*** and ***Read Book.*** They are two-word books where the colours have essential roles to play.
In Monkey Fine the colour is warmly red inside home while it changes to chilly blue/green outside the house. Sentences consist of just two words, like: "come rain", "high mountains"... They are obvious, simple and entertaining, just what children and parents need.
Tidholm´s pictures breath dreams, and in every cow's eye, there is a sorrow – the complexity and deep poetry is really worth a study of its own.

The very best picture books for small children shall be interesting to read time after time, over and over again. By adults as well a by children. Thomas and Anna Clara Tidholm's books belong to that category. Not the least the books about **Ture**. The name of his dog is Hey!

Boo and Bah by *Olof* and *Lena Landström* are two sheep meeting several adventures.
When the try to pick berries the ants become a problem. The pictures are almost perfect, everything is there, details and the co-operation between the two sheep. What a marriage!

Rut and Knut are two other very funny individuals. Words are rhyming, and the pictures are rather drastic; creates laughter and smiles. *Carin* and *Stina Wersén* are the artists, and the themes are all about

big sister and younger brother playing together. They may be doctors, artists or just cooking. Fantasy is important, is the mother of inventions.

Lena Anderson's books about **Kotten** (and Maja) expresses the Swedish summer in bright green, yellow, blue and pink. Beautiful transparent water colours where the nuances carry much of the messages. Kotten is a hedgehog, always friendly and helpful. One day she seem rather shy, and when she finally comes out with a babyKotten, the situation becomes obvious for everyone. Lena Andersson´s books are fiction on the border to non-fiction – educational
and informative.

Experiments in shapes and colours
Picture books give the artists many opportunities to try new ideas, space for free creation and new inventions. For more than 100 years, picture books have been important media for development of artistic expressions that reaches out to many. Economically the picture book is vital to Swedish publishers, articles even for the export market. Picture books are the most popular books in Swedish public libraries.

A picture book has a flow, a logical order in which the pictures and the words correspond, an arena for experiments in colour and shape. Books from recent years are brave, bold and full of vigour. Some have great similarity to cartoons and it is not unusual that some illustrators also do cartoons. This enables the child to experience many different artistic expressions.

One of the artists is *Joakim Lindengren*. His pictures are somewhat burlesque, have a weight and are not ingratiating at all. They are however very interesting with many references to art and literature.
Daddy Dog written by *Håkan Jaensson* is a good example. The daddy is suddenly gone and seems to be replaced with a dog with the father's tie round it's neck. Is daddy transformed to a dog?
Majvor Persson Malm's modernistic drawings in ***The princess and the moon*** give a very special character to the saga. The words are written by *Osna Opatowsky-Wahlberg*.

Is everything possible to do with a fairy tale? Yes, if the result is good and there is an idea, I think new inventions are both amusing and developing. In the new millenium version of ***Golden Curl and the three bears,*** Majvor Persson Malm has managed very well. Her speedy pictures are amusing to watch. The three bears carry and use many of the attributes of the new age, cellphones, lap top, designed furniture and sunglasses. Naturally the bears are off shopping while Golden Curl arrives at their house. The connections to the classical fairy tale gives many revelations and comments on our time.

Humour is the key
Humour is another obvious feature of today's Swedish picture books and can be found even in books about serious matters. It is expressed on many levels and formulated in several ways, but most often the pictures make the humorous comments on the story. One of my favourites is:

The Hungry Handbag by *Katarina Mazetti* and *Maria Lindhagen*. A very bold and poisonously green handbag made of crocodile skin eats everything that comes in it's way.
Even cellphones. It is smart too. The owner, Svea Svan, forgets things and have a rather bad sight, but manages in mysterious ways to get out of many complicated situations.

Just as funny is ***Glossa's Café*** by *Pija Lindenbaum*. To be a mean which can be boring.
So Glossa starts a Café up on her mountain. It is however very difficult to keep her fingers away from magic. She transfers the postman to a sparrow. She does a lot more, and in the end nobody dares to visit the café. The pictures are drastic, fully of mimicry and really moving. You can feel the heat and the burning sun up on the mountain where Glossa lives (looks like Greece to me). The witch herself is huge

and ugly. Believe it or not, but she is slowly changing towards becoming a better and nicer person, although she gets help from the outside. Nothing in this book is for sure, and life contains many dimensions. Not everybody who is transformed by the witch wants to become normal again…

Pernilla Stalfelt likes to deal with odd issues in her books. It all started with ***The Hair Book***.
Since then she has made ***The Poo-Poo Book***, ***The Small Worm Book, The Locomotive wolf*** and more. Pernilla Stalfelt deals closely with hairstyles and all places where hair may occur, different kind of faeces and worms. Even the fantasy animal The Locomotive Wolf is almost scientifically described, nice and dangerous at the same time. This is humour dealing with matters that every child think of.

Another very special book is ***Nude bottoms***. This book by *Martin Olcza* illustrated *by Anna Sandler* makes many children and adults laugh together. Where and when should clothes be worn? While skiing? Yes! In the sauna bath? No! This is illustrated by a nude lady skiing and a very well dressed person sweating in a sauna bath. The nude bodies look very healthy to me, not slimmed like models, just ordinary fat or thin bodies that anyone can identify with.

Picture books are dealing with many difficult questions? Questions that cannot be solved and we therefore must accept and live with. Maybe these feelings are easier to express within the concept of the picture book?

I believe that the co-operation between words and pictures creates a new dimension that reaches out more easily and touches us more strongly. The picture book allows open endings, and what cannot be told in words can very well be expressed in the pictures. Even very difficult topics like death can be dealt with in a picture book.

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